

## **Engineered Formula**

It is comforting to believe that we have the capability to make decisions for ourselves, however, this is actually very far from the truth. In my installation I wanted to highlight this hidden lack of control. When we buy something, we are presented with false choices that makes us believe we have the power when, in fact, the company has already calculated our response. The hardest part is trying to understand what comes next. I am aware that the world around me has manipulated the questions I'm asked and the advertisements I see, but now, how can I find a way to see past the engineered formula and truly make decisions for myself? I am inspired by this concept of true personal decision making. I want to use this concept in my art to shed light on the inauthenticity behind what we consider free will when it comes to decision making.

In order to explore my topic further I created an installation that combined elements of painting, collage, and sculpture. When you step into the whirlwind that is my project the viewer is surrounded by examples of false choice and manipulation.

My sculpture shows how we are constantly surrounded by this big whirlwind of opinions, products, and ideas but rarely do we notice just how large scale this concept of false choice is. I want to examine and illustrate the many things that are pushed at us until we agree in a way that is somewhat interactive with the viewer.

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# Manipulating The Masses

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***WRITER'S NOTE:***

*This paper addresses the hidden manipulation used in the world of advertising. For decades businesses have been using psychoanalysis to apply concepts of the unconscious mind to techniques in advertising. In an exploration to understand the deeper levels of advertising I asked the question; how can I use manipulation techniques in the same way marketers do?*

I have always struggled when making decisions. Whether it is the choice between two flavors of ice cream or deciding whether or not I should splurge on a new piece of clothing. This is a very common dilemma among many people and I always worry about whether I am making the right decision. In reality there is no possible way to accurately understand what the consequences of a choice will be<sup>1</sup>, but I still debate in my head which one is better than the other. When I make decisions, I have an overwhelming sense of control that makes me feel like I have power over my choices. However, very rarely do we actually have full control over what products we buy or what opinions we choose to believe.<sup>2</sup> I find it severely disconcerting to have a piece of information ripped away from what I originally considered a fundamental part of the human experience. Our minds are constructed in certain ways that are unchangeable. Some of these constructions make it very hard to consistently make conscious logical decisions.<sup>3</sup> Advertisers are also complete professionals when it comes to manipulating the mind to benefit the business. Every time that we buy something, we are presented with false choices that make us believe we are the ones in control when, in fact, the company has already calculated our response.<sup>4</sup> The hardest part is trying to understand what comes next. I am aware that the world around me has manipulated the questions I'm asked and the advertisements I see, but now how can I find a way to see past the engineered formula and truly make decisions for myself?

It is comforting to believe that we have the capability to make decisions for ourselves, however, this is actually very far from the truth. Most of our decisions are processed in an unconscious part of our mind.<sup>5</sup> This makes it very easy for advertisers to tap into our unconscious desires and exploit them to make a profit. This technique of applying psychoanalysis to advertising has shaped America into a new age of subconscious consumerism. In a world full of endless choices, how much of our decision making process is really in our control?

To understand the depths of our freedom of choice, it is important to first understand how we make decisions. The process starts with a constant battle between intuition and logic. Although our intuition is strong, humans have two systems of thinking that dictate how we react to different situations, products, beliefs, or ideas. Our logical mind is the slower system of thinking that is responsible for analyzing problems and producing a rational answer.<sup>6</sup> Although our attentive mind is very good at solving problems rationally, this system is very slow and requires a lot of energy.<sup>7</sup> The human brain is lazy when it comes to this process so it becomes very hard for the logical mind to focus on two things at once. Walking alone can be enough to occupy most of the attentive mind. This is one of the reasons why many people will turn down the radio in their car when approaching

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<sup>1</sup> TED Radio Hour (Producer), & Raz, G. (n.d.). Decisions, Decisions, Decisions [Recorded by S. Iyengar] [Podcast]. (September 13, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>4</sup> Kotler, P., Hibbard, J. D., & Grayson, K. A. (2018, May 3). Marketing. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from Encyclopaedia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/marketing>

<sup>5</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>6</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>7</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

a destination to read house numbers or street signs better. More commonly, our logical mind will give the power over to our intuition. This unconscious autopilot is fast and automatic which makes it more likely to override our rational ways of thinking.<sup>8</sup> This overriding process is where the problems associated with decision making arise because our logical system of thinking doesn't always get the time it needs to form a rational response.<sup>9</sup> To make things more difficult for our brains, our thinking process is also full of systematic mistakes, or cognitive biases. These biases affect everything we do and are responsible for habits like spending impulsively and being overly influenced by other people's beliefs.<sup>10</sup> To justify these automatic responses, our logical mind invents a reason why we think or believe something. One of the most important biases is the present bias which is responsible for telling the mind to prioritize the immediate outcome over possible future outcomes.<sup>11</sup> For example, if someone were to offer you a slice of cake right now, or a full cake in one week, most people will choose to take the one slice immediately because it seems impossible to wait even though, logically, it's a worse deal. The present bias is the culprit for many actions like overeating, smoking, and unprotected sex that can have instant pleasure with a risk of unforeseen consequences.<sup>12</sup> In the 1960s, Walter Mischel, a Stanford professor, conducted an experiment that directly challenges our present bias. Mischel and his team tested hundreds of children in what they called *The Marshmallow Experiment*. The experiment started by taking each child into a private room where there was one single marshmallow sitting in front of them. The researcher told the kid that they were going to leave the room and if the child did not eat the first marshmallow, then they would receive another marshmallow.<sup>13</sup> The researcher left for 15 minutes and during this time some kids immediately ate the first marshmallow, some waited a few minutes before indulging, and a few were able to resist the temptation and were rewarded with the second marshmallow. In 1972 the experiment was published and the results were shocking.<sup>14</sup> This study perfectly reflected the power of delayed gratification. After the kids grew up they were called back to do some follow up studies that tracked each child's progress. Among the kids who were able to wait and delay their gratification they received, "higher SAT scores, lower levels of substance abuse, lower likelihood of obesity, better responses to stress, better social skills as reported by their parents, and generally better scores in a range of other life measures."<sup>15</sup> This study proved that the ability to delay gratification was essential to an accomplished life. A more direct example of the benefits of delaying gratification is; delaying the gratification of screen time and doing your homework will lead to better grades. Another common bias we fall victim to is the confirmation

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<sup>8</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>9</sup> TED Radio Hour (Producer), & Raz, G. (n.d.). Decisions, Decisions, Decisions [Recorded by S. Iyengar] [Podcast]. (September 13, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>11</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>12</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>13</sup> Clear, J. (n.d.). 40 Years of Stanford Research Found That People With This One Quality Are More Likely to Succeed. Retrieved May 3, 2019, from James Clear website: <https://jamesclear.com/delayed-gratification>

<sup>14</sup> Clear, J. (n.d.). 40 Years of Stanford Research Found That People With This One Quality Are More Likely to Succeed. Retrieved May 3, 2019, from James Clear website: <https://jamesclear.com/delayed-gratification>

<sup>15</sup> Clear, J. (n.d.). 40 Years of Stanford Research Found That People With This One Quality Are More Likely to Succeed. Retrieved May 3, 2019, from James Clear website: <https://jamesclear.com/delayed-gratification>

bias. This causes us to look for information that confirms what we already know, and is responsible for why many people feel compelled to watch news from a source that agrees with their views.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Hindsight bias or negativity bias persuades our mind to remember negative events much more than positive ones.<sup>17</sup> Our negativity bias is the reason why we feel the pain of financial loss more than the pleasure of a gain. These biases subconsciously alter our minds to think in an irrational way and because these biases are so deeply rooted, they may be impossible to change.<sup>18</sup>

In the advertising world these innate human biases are the perfect Achilles' heel when trying to manipulate consumers into buying products. By using the rhetorical triangle, marketers can reference the three appeals identified by Aristotle: ethos, pathos, and logos. When looking at logical appeals, some of the most effective advertising techniques include the bandwagon and card stacking techniques.<sup>19</sup> The bandwagon technique uses language that convinces the consumer that they should do something because everyone else is doing it.<sup>20</sup> This technique plays on the idea of "groupthink," a common concept in psychology that shows people will follow the crowd when there is a majority of three or more people who support an opinion or idea. Card stacking is a propaganda technique that tries to manipulate consumers by emphasizing certain facts and omitting others. This propaganda technique appeals to our logical mind because we don't always realize when advertisers are distorting or omitting facts to sell an item. Advertisers can also appeal to our emotions when selling products.<sup>21</sup> One technique that they use is casting "plain folk" in advertisements to show consumers a more relatable example of their product. Other techniques include: *name calling*, where companies will stereotype the competition with a bad label; *demonizing*, where advertisers portray the opposing idea as evil; *patriotic appeal*, which is appealing to the idea of patriotism; and *glittering generalities*, where companies use "good" labels such as democratic, patriotic, amazing, beautiful, and exciting that aren't supported by facts.<sup>22</sup> Catchy slogans and humor are also very effective ways to appeal to our emotions of happiness and satisfaction. What makes emotional appeals so effective is that when companies can associate their product with human emotions, people will be more likely to remember the product.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, advertisers will use techniques that appeal to human ethics. Companies will use *testimonials* and *transfers* from celebrities or well respected public figures. This technique makes "regular" consumers believe that if a famous public figure or expert can benefit from a certain product than an average person would also benefit from that product. When using these human appeals, specific techniques can also be applied to further coax consumers into buying certain products. The first

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<sup>16</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>17</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>18</sup> Macdonald, T. (2014, February 24). How do we really make decisions. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26258662>

<sup>19</sup> Talks at Google (Producer). (2008). Richard Thaler [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9K25ECIpU>

<sup>20</sup> Talks at Google (Producer). (2008). Richard Thaler [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9K25ECIpU>

<sup>21</sup> Talks at Google (Producer). (2008). Richard Thaler [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9K25ECIpU>

<sup>22</sup> Talks at Google (Producer). (2008). Richard Thaler [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9K25ECIpU>

<sup>23</sup> TED Radio Hour (Producer), & Raz, G. (n.d.). Decisions, Decisions, Decisions [Recorded by S. Iyengar] [Podcast]. (September 13, 2018)

way to manipulate a response is by formulating specific defaults that will use less cognitive energy to decide on. When given the option to switch something many people will just choose to leave it at the default because our logical brain is lazy and would rather just leave it on what seems to be a logical choice.<sup>24</sup> Another way advertisers manipulate responses is through feedback. If a customer receives feedback showing their habits with the product compared to national averages the consumer will always want to be higher than the average even if that means switching to a more expensive product that will raise their standings. Feedback allows for corrective behavior which appeals to our logical mind as well.<sup>25</sup> Lastly a common tool in manipulation is the use of incentives.<sup>26</sup> Using incentives unconsciously triggers our present bias and the more immediate an incentive is awarded, the more influential it will be in shaping preference. These techniques have been applied throughout the decades. Manipulation in this form was first used in propaganda. Technically, propaganda is the act of spreading information, rumors, lies or arguments to influence the opinion of the masses but it can be portrayed in many manipulative ways such as symbols, words, gestures, music, clothing, and more.<sup>27</sup> In today's society the term propaganda has many bad connotations and is considered a “dirty word” avoided by many people in casual conversation.<sup>28</sup> Similarly to the general public, companies are almost never caught talking about the manipulating propaganda techniques that they constantly use in their advertising to avoid scrutiny by consumers.

As the role of consumers started to shift in America, the term *propaganda* was updated in the 1920s and replaced with the phrase *public relations*.<sup>29</sup> The role of public relations was once defined by Edward Bernays, as “the engineering of consent.” Bernays was a leading voice during this new age of combining psychoanalysis with advertising. Edward Bernays was the nephew of Sigmund Freud and became interested in his uncle’s discoveries about the conscious and unconscious mind.<sup>30</sup> Bernays used Freud's findings to uncover inner desires and exploit them for profit. Coming out of times of war, Americans were trained to buy items on a need basis rather than on a want basis.<sup>31</sup> Big corporations left it to Bernays to shift Americans mentally from need to desire. In this time psychological theory became essential in advertising and, with Bernays’ help, companies started to use emotional appeals to connect consumer emotions to a product or service.<sup>32</sup> One of Bernays’ most well-known campaigns was his success in breaking the taboo against women smoking in public. Bernays hired suffragettes to march in the 1929 Easter Parade

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<sup>24</sup> TED Radio Hour (Producer), & Raz, G. (n.d.). Decisions, Decisions, Decisions [Recorded by S. Iyengar] [Podcast]. (September 13, 2018)

<sup>25</sup> Talks at Google (Producer). (2008). Richard Thaler [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9K25ECIpU>

<sup>26</sup> Kotler, P., Hibbard, J. D., & Grayson, K. A. (2018, May 3). Marketing. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from Encyclopaedia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/marketing>

<sup>27</sup> Smith, B. L. (2019, January 22). Propaganda. Retrieved April 9, 2019, from Encyclopædia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>

<sup>28</sup> Smith, B. L. (2019, January 22). Propaganda. Retrieved April 9, 2019, from Encyclopædia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>

<sup>29</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (Ed.). (2019, April 8). Edward Bernays. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica database.

<sup>30</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (Ed.). (2019, April 8). Edward Bernays. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica database.

<sup>31</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>32</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

in New York City, and told the press that the debutants would be lighting “Torches of Freedom.”<sup>33</sup> Once the women made it to the journalism booth they lit and smoked cigarettes as they marched. Newspapers everywhere had front page headlines reading “Group of Girls Puff as a Gesture of 'Freedom'” which associated the cigarettes with freedom and patriotism. Bernays had been working with a large tobacco company at the time and after this campaign, sales skyrocketed because now the company was able to reach a whole new demographic of consumers. Bernays was able to understand the mind of the masses and with this new concept American consumerism began to rise. It continued to rise until the stock market crashed causing everyone to stop buying products that they didn’t really need. While business stopped benefiting from Bernays’ techniques, American governments and politicians decided to implement these techniques in their own campaigns and speeches.<sup>34</sup> During Franklin Roosevelt’s first term he disagreed with Bernays’ practices because he thought the masses could think rationally and should be part of political decision making, forging a new relationship between the sensible masses and politicians. Following the reelection of Roosevelt, big business decided to go back and start creating emotional connection to big business/products using Bernays’ techniques. As time progressed the idea of public relations was used more and more, however the government did not like this use of manipulation.<sup>35</sup> The government even tried exploiting the illegitimacy of the press and told the masses that they should control their press, which is a shocking flip from what the government’s role in fake news is nowadays. However, to the government’s dissatisfaction Bernays was still able to maintain control over the minds of the masses. Bernays wanted to create a marriage between capitalism and democracy in American society and he manipulated the masses into wanting this too. Bernays created a new form of democracy where business could cater to people's desires in a way politicians couldn’t. The public was turned into passive consumers driven by unconscious desires. After the Second World War, the government became fearful of the masses’ collective power when they were all using their rational mind.<sup>36</sup> There was an increased focus on learning about the mind and in 1946 the National Mental Health Act was passed. The American government thought that the best way to secure control over the masses was to get Bernays on their side working with them. Bernays adapted his techniques well to the political scene and discovered the tactic of using fear in politics to gain the loyalty of the masses.<sup>37</sup> We still see examples of this in our current political system, one including Trump's campaign strongly playing off of the fear of the masses.<sup>38</sup> Although it seems like these controlling techniques come from a place of bad intent, Bernays had manipulated the masses because he believed that the interests of business and the interests of America were indivisible, especially when faced with the threat of communism. However, Bernays thought that it would be impossible to explain this rationally to the American

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<sup>33</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (Ed.). (2019, April 8). Edward Bernays. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica database.

<sup>34</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>35</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>36</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>37</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>38</sup> Bates, J. (n.d.). 12 Psychological Tactics Donald Trump Uses to Manipulate the Masses. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from High Existence website: <https://highexistence.com/12-psychological-tactics-donald-trump-uses-to-manipulate-the-masses/>



people because Bernays considered the public to be irrational. It wasn't until Herbert Marcuse that someone started challenging the social world and told the public that they shouldn't be adapting to it. Marcuse switched the source of evil from inward conflict to the society itself, that the problems of society stayed in the society level not at the personal level of the people in society.<sup>39</sup> According to Marcuse, if people didn't challenge society they were submitting to the evil. Enemies of the Freud family also opposed the current system of society<sup>40</sup>. Many believed that the way to build a better society is to let the self-free. It then becomes a difficult situation because on one hand there are already extremely secure manipulation techniques in place, but now the public is being told to break free from society. If we have been told to break free of society's grip since the 1900s why has little changed when it come to our choices?

With so many products, ideas, and opinions constantly being pressed upon us, it is very hard to truly make decisions for ourselves. Our brains are already hardwired to take the easiest way when making decisions even if it is not always the most logical response. This creates a large window for advertisers to abuse. If an advertising company can simply present our minds with a product that coincides with what our unconscious mind deems logical, as consumers we can easily be moldable. Throughout American history it is clear that consumerism has risen at an alarming rate but it is happening at a subconscious level, which makes it very hard to stop. Even though it is apparent that many of our decisions are actually being made for us, it is almost impossible to know if we will ever be able to truly break free and make choices for ourselves.

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<sup>39</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

<sup>40</sup> Curtis, A. (Producer/Director). (2002). The Century of the Self [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

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